

Acoustic Renaissance

For years AER's Compact 60 amp has ruled as the acoustic player's indispensable live companion. But now there is a challenger to the throne, and a very worthy one at that...

Words David Mead Photography Olly Curtis



UDO ROESNER AMPS DA CAPO 75 ACOUSTIC AMP £949

CONTACT Barnes & Mullins PHONE 01691 652449 WEB www.bandm.co.uk

1 **Hmm, this looks rather familiar...**
Funny you should mention it. Udo Roesner, the designer of the Da Capo, also designed the AER Compact 60, and he's taken his former brainchild as pretty much the aesthetic starting point for his latest creation.

2 **What has been upgraded, exactly?**
As far as we can see, Udo has gone back to the drawing board and rethought the whole thing from the ground up. So everything you liked about the Compact 60 is here but in a souped-up or enhanced form.

3 **What about new features?**
What immediately stands out to us is the new dual-cone speaker and the rejigged built-in effects section. Everything seems warmer and more hi-fi to our ears, and the high-pass filter on Channel 2 offers a lot of extra control over either big-bodied acoustics or mics.

1. Channel 2 features a high-pass filter (hpf) to offer extra control over bass frequencies

2. A push-button selector on both channels toggles between line and microphone level inputs

When a player of Tommy Emmanuel's calibre champions a brand-new amplifier stating it's the best amp he's ever played through – despite having his own signature model with a different manufacturer – there's an understandable tremor of curiosity among acoustic performers everywhere. Tommy forsaking AER? That's big news in some quarters. But let's dip below the surface for a moment and examine the evidence. Both the Compact 60 and this new Da Capo amplifier were designed by Udo Roesner who has now stepped away from AER and started his own company called Udo Roesner Amps. As you will see in our interview with him that follows this review, Udo has gone back to the drawing board and pretty much re-examined everything that made the Compact 60 such a stalwart in the first place.

In musical terms, Da Capo means "repeat from the beginning" and so now perhaps we can get a clearer idea of the initiative behind the new amp. Yes, cosmetically at least it owes a lot to AER's flagship, but just about everything else has been reviewed, revised and revitalised. So is it, as the handbook describes, a "giant in a shoebox, powerful, crisp, clear, assertive and yet so warm, mellow and beautifully balanced"? Let's fire it up, take it out for a spin and find out.

The Da Capo features an analogue preamp and A/B Class analogue power amplifier, delivering 75 watts into a specially designed eight-inch dual-cone speaker. Udo tells us that it has a larger transformer in order to deliver more power and enhance the unit's low-end response. Everything is tucked away inside a remarkably small plywood box with a large, workmanlike handle on top and a gigbag that makes portability a breeze. It's a tad heavier than a Compact 60, Udo informing us that this is down to

Virtually everything a gigging acoustic player needs in one compact unit

the transformer size, but a side-by-side comparison reveals there actually isn't much in it at all. You could easily set off to a gig with a guitar case in one hand and the Da Capo over your shoulder and not worry too much about straining anything, put it that way.

The amp's two channels both feature jack and XLR mic inputs with mic/line push buttons to select between either. It also has 48-volt phantom power for both XLR inputs, meaning you can use a mic for either





3. The amp's output section features a separate XLR for each channel plus line outputs to connect to a mixer or a soundcard

4. A tough metal grille protects the amp's custom eight-inch dual-cone speaker

vocals or sound reinforcement for your guitar, and choose which channel's preamp controls suit your setup the best.

Channel 1 features controls for Gain, Tone – essentially a treble boost – push-button, Bass, Middle and Treble. On Channel 2 the controls are the same, except that now you have a high-pass filter replacing the treble boost option. This control has the effect of letting higher frequencies through into the sound picture while rolling off the bass. It's a useful control if you happen to have a large-bodied acoustic that's prone to low-end feedback or if you have a microphone and want to subdue unwanted bass resonance.

There are six built-in digital effects on a rotary control in the 'efx' section, along with Pan and Level rotaries. The effects give you: Long Reverb, Short Reverb, Chorus, Custom Delay, My Delay and Tap n' Delay – all being controlled by a TRS footswitch, which isn't provided, but we're



A larger transformer delivers more power and enhances the low-end response

assured that any standard double unit will do the job of both switching effects on and off and tapping in the delay rate. The Pan control delivers the chosen effect across the amp's two channels: if you only require reverb, say, on Channel 1 then leave the control panned to the left; if you want it on Channel 2, pan to the right; and any position in between offers incremental dispersion between the two. Finishing off the preamp control array at the far end, you'll find the Master Volume.

Udo highlights that the preamp controls are interactive: "The Da Capo is not simply a box with a speaker, it is a pretty complex arrangement of signal processing stages that all interact and need to be at peace with each other for best performance..." It's also important to note that some of the factory-set parameters can be reset via jumpers on the main circuit board inside the amp. You can, for instance, change the footswitch so that it acts as an on/off for the effects loop, but all jumpers – and there are 11 – should only be adjusted by someone who knows what they're doing. In other words, there are no user-serviceable parts inside.

Meanwhile, on the back of the amp we find outputs for headphones, footswitch,

send and return for the parallel effects loop, two line outs (1 for home recording via a soundcard, and 2 for connection to a mixing desk). There are also XLR balanced outputs for each channel independently and a mini-jack aux-in for inputting backing tracks.

It sounds to us like Udo's 30-year experience with amp design has culminated in a very well-thought-out package that incorporates virtually everything a gigging acoustic player needs in one compact unit. But what's it like in practice? It's time to hook it up to a guitar and find out.

Feel & Sounds

Our test guitar is a Fylde Goodfellow, fitted with a Headway FEQ under-saddle pickup, which has seen action in various live acoustic settings, inputted electronically either via PA or through our Compact 60. One thing that is immediately apparent is the warmth the Da Capo brings to the sound. Just a few moments fiddling with the preamp controls on Channel 1 and setting the reverb to Long Reverb, and the sound literally takes us aback with its musicality. It's a sound that makes you want to stay and play for longer, and that's never a bad thing.

5. Designer Udo Roesner points out that all the preamp controls on the Da Capo are interactive and will need to be "at peace with each other for best performance"

THE RIVALS

Obviously the AER Compact 60 is the main contender if you're looking for a versatile, trustworthy and robust acoustic amp. Expect to pay around £849 for the Mk IV and £899 for Tommy Emmanuel's signature model, which includes some features tuned to TE's specification, including the reverb settings.

Other makes would include Fender's Acoustic 100 at £359, Marshall's AS50D for £269, and Fishman's Loudbox range, including the Loudbox Mini at £289 and the Loudbox Artist Bluetooth for £521.

If you need something you can carry to a gig on the bus or tube, we're hearing very good things about Schertler's range of acoustic amps. Check out the Schertler David at £1,044, for instance.



The six built-in digital effects in the 'efx' section include: Long Reverb, Short Reverb, Chorus, Custom Delay, My Delay and Tap n' Delay

We found that what Udo told us about the controls being more interactive is absolutely spot on, too. When compared with the Compact 60, it takes longer to set a sound up, but the time spent is worth it. We don't usually have to turn the bass down for the Goodfellow, but here we dropped it a fair bit, as well as reducing the mids a little, too. There's a very rich bass to be had here, probably thanks to the custom-built speaker and ported cab. Engaging the Tone button brings sparkle to the top-end, which is handy for chordal accompaniment when you want some shimmer to find its way through a mix.

Swapping to Channel 2, we play with the high-pass filter, which offers more control over reducing the bass. Getting the balance right between the HPF, Bass and Mid controls takes a little bit of concentrated effort, but, once again, the results are worthwhile. The main thing we felt here was that we were more in control of the

When compared with the Compact 60, it takes longer to set a sound up, but the time spent is worth it

Goodfellow's sound and found ourselves making plans to try using the amp on the next available gig. After all, with this amount of control it's logical to assume that all one has to do is offer the soundman an XLR output or two and the job's all done. There is so much here that we've already decided the Da Capo is headed for our Longtermers section. And we can't wait to start experimenting with other guitars and maybe even a mic added to the guitar for an extra level of control.

Verdict

If you found yourself playing a game of 'fantasy acoustic gig gear' and decided to use an amp rather than DI, you'd probably opt for one that was not only portable but comes with a great sound and mixing-desk levels of EQ quality, too. Throw in an effects loop – switchable if you get an electronics boffin to flip the jumper inside – and mic or line level inputs, phantom power to allow the use of studio-quality condenser mics, and XLR outputs on both channels to make the sound guy's job an easier one. Add to this a very usable onboard digital reverb and you're practically all set for an evening of acoustic bliss; do a thorough soundcheck then sit back and have some fun. The Da Capo covers all these factors – and more. We think we've found a new best friend. **A**



UDO ROESNER AMPS DA CAPO 75 ACOUSTIC AMP

PRICE: £949 (inc gigbag)
ORIGIN: Indonesia
TYPE: Analogue preamp and A/B Class analogue power amplifier
OUTPUT: 75W
DIMENSIONS: 265 (h) x 325 (w) x 245mm (d)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 7.5/16.5
CABINET: Plywood
LOUDSPEAKER: Custom 8" twin cone, full range
CHANNELS: 2 mic/line on each
CONTROLS: Channel 1: mic/line switch, gain, tone switch (treble boost), bass, middle, treble. Channel 2: mic/line switch, gain, high pass filter, bass, middle, treble. Both channels: effects pan, FX level, master volume
ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Built-in effects: Long Reverb, Short Reverb, Chorus, Custom Delay, My Delay and Tap n' Delay, Headphone output, 2x line out (1: lower level for soundcards, etc; 2: mixing consoles), 2x DI out (balanced XLR for both channels), footswitch (not provided), aux in
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: None as yet



PROS A familiar face with a totally new personality – everything you need in one compact unit

CONS Preamp controls may be fiddly for some, but the results are worth the effort

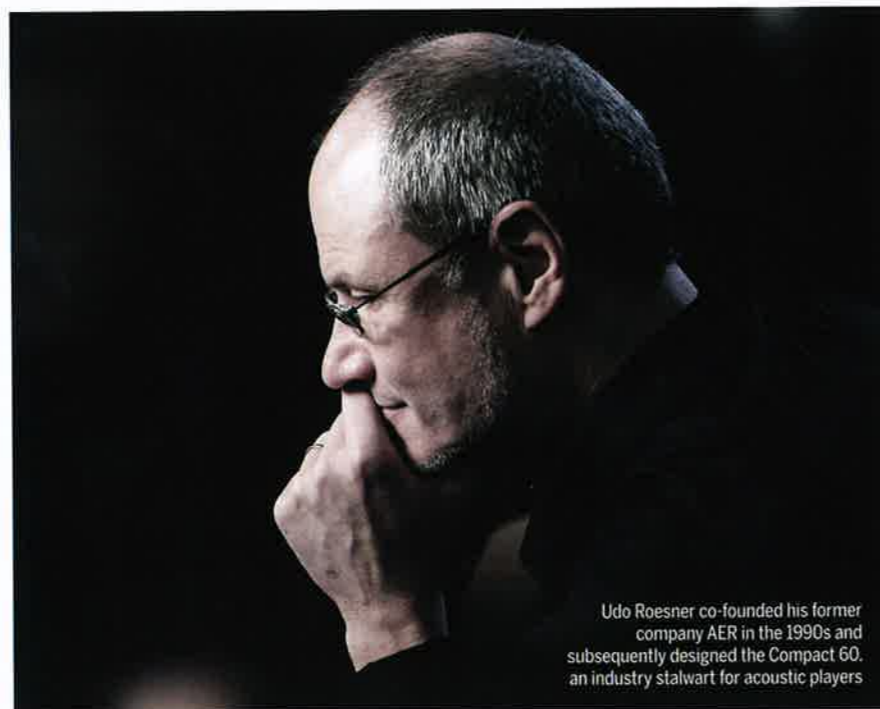
Design For Life

We talk to the Da Capo's creator, Udo Roesner, about the thinking behind his new amplifier and how some of its upgraded features came about

Words David Mead

It's always interesting to talk to the designer of a piece of new gear. Often, their perspective is very different to the musician in whose hands the gear will end up. As a general rule, guitarists have little or no idea about what goes on under the hood of an effects pedal or amplifier. Their assessment is merely based upon whether it sounds good or not. As you can tell from the review on the preceding pages, we were really quite enamoured with the Da Capo 75 and were eager to hear about its origins. After all, this was the man who brought us the Compact 60, an amp that has become pretty much standard issue among acoustic players. So we were very curious about what Udo found on his journey back to the drawing board.

"It has the ability to reproduce fine timbres, but it's not analytical or cold"



Udo Roesner co-founded his former company AER in the 1990s and subsequently designed the Compact 60, an industry stalwart for acoustic players

The Da Capo sounds more 'hi-fi' with a lot of added warmth to the sound – would that be an accurate appraisal?

"I know what you're trying to say, but I never would use the term 'hi-fi'. To me, 'hi-fi' is something that reaches the ear more than it reaches the body, and I would say the Da Capo has quite a potential to hit the body, so I would rather call it 'pro audio' than 'hi-fi' in this respect. But you are absolutely right; the Da Capo has a certain amount of delicacy and softness and warmth in contrast to the Compact 60. Believe me, I've dealt with the Compact 60 for so many years that I know it inside out, and I know there's a couple of things that can be annoying, especially if you consider medium-class guitars or limited skills or whatever. It can turn into something harsh pretty quickly, and one of the key goals for me was to try to find a way to get this solved."

The high-pass filter is one of the key new features on Channel 2 of the amp.

"It's always a question of how complex you want to design something to be because,

at the end of the day, features are very important in the sense of being able to combine things to make them flexible. I decided to implement a high-pass filter, as well as the three-way equalisation, because there are so many different guitars and some, let's say a bigger-bodied one, may take advantage of having the extra control with the high-pass filter – bringing the low-end grumble under control. It's pretty flexible even though the two channels are not identical; they sound different."

So you could use a microphone in front of the guitar in Channel 2 and tame it with the high-pass filter while blending it in with the under-saddle pickup in Channel 1?

"Yes. If you think about the fact that there are some jazz players who use a microphone [on the guitar] as well in order to capture a little bit of the acoustic sound, it has a lot of flexibility. You can really bring the microphone to the point of best performance without losing volume or a round, full sound."

Another part of the upgraded design is the dual-cone speaker.

"Well, it's modified for sure, but I'm not a speaker maker. As you may understand, the speaker is one of the most crucial elements in the whole setup. It has a bigger tolerance than other elements in the electronics. To get a speaker to do what it's supposed to do there's always a bit of nagging the speaker maker to have another attempt, send another sample. Then you're back into measurement, comparison and evaluation with playing and listening.

"Another part is gain structure and how we set up the EQs, they are modified as well, and the cabinet has been modified quite significantly. The cabinet is a pretty familiar shape, but the speaker inside has quite a lot more volume to work in.

"Most people don't understand in this preset world that we're living in, the audio range is actually very, very small and the tools that we have are pretty raw and our hearing is extremely sensitive. So sometimes things that are not audible, not visual and definitely not measurable



"It's always been my wish to move forward with a sound that gives you the opportunity to get lost in it"

Udo Roesner

Acoustic master Tommy Emmanuel has said the Da Capo is the best amp he's ever played through – that's some recommendation!

make quite a big difference. You get a result, but what the result actually means is still very doubtful and you're always back to listening again, trying to figure out what is potentially a point you can grab and modify to get to a slightly different state. If it's too much – if you overdo it – you'll easily end up with a catastrophe. It's a walk on the edge, pretty much."

How many of the modifications were based on customer feedback and how many on things you have wanted to do for a while?

"That's a good question – and it's a fair mix, I have to say. I mean, I have been following my own product for decades now. The AER was my baby and so I'm pretty familiar with everything in there, and I've done lots of customer relations things and I've worked with distributors, stores and a lot of musicians. But it can also be quite difficult and I find that the quality of the instrument over the decades has changed. It has acquired more cosmetic things and features rather than tone. I find

many instruments where I'm actually quite disappointed in the way they sound. A lot of players use effects to make their sound more spectacular, but if you go back to just the guitar, the pickup and the amp then the quality of the guitar is extremely important.


"In the earlier days instruments were less bright, they were more mid-y, more round, and that frequency range is more difficult to project. So being more present and supporting more frequency ranges that really drive the signal path, that was the objective at that time. The Da Capo has the ability to reproduce all the fine timbres that you put into it, but it's not analytical or cold. It has always been my wish to move forward with a sound that is lively and direct and instantly gives you the opportunity to get lost in it – be washed away on the wave of sound that you're generating."

You also seem to have focused on enhanced connectivity, with two separate balanced XLR outputs.

"I think it's a wonderful feature because you really have clear channel separation.

You can do whatever you want with the channels, there are no rules. But the man at the mixing desk knows his job; he wants the purest signal that he can get and if this is so then he's happy and everyone is happy. If you want combined signals with the effects and everything, you have the line outs because we're not talking sensitive microphones signals. We don't need balanced signal processing for that kind of signal transport. If you want a signal combined with the effects then use the line out. We've kept the DIs as pure as possible and also, as there are two, not only is the separation important, they are not connected in such a way that an unused channel adds noise to the DI out."

You sound very happy with the Da Capo.

"Oh yeah. I'm used to people saying, 'It could have had this or that...' There's always somebody who needs a different setup. But we're working on something interesting that we will be showing people at the [2022] NAMM Show." 

www.udo-amps.com